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SUBJECT: ALGERIA'S MODERATE ISLAMIST LEADER: A VIEW FROM
INSIDE THE TENT

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Movement for a Society of Peace (MSP - Muslim Brotherhood) President Aboudjerra Soltani gave the Ambassador on March 4 Algeria's official Islamist vision of how to increase political participation and create accountability in local government. Soltani said the most critical need was for political reform that would clarify the powers of local officials, making them accountable as "local presidents." The MSP, one of the three parties in Algeria's ruling coalition, decided in its early 1990s beginnings that it could accomplish more by participating in the political system than by choosing what Soltani called "hard opposition." Soltani was critical of the impotent Algerian opposition, but also pointed out that with the lost decade of 1990s unrest, Algeria's democratic experience was only ten years old. Because of this, Soltani said that countries like France and the U.S., specifically with the annual Human Rights Report, should judge Algeria not by their own criteria but by yardsticks relative to Algeria's own experience. END SUMMARY.

DEMOCRATIC EVOLUTION

¶2. (C) In the Ambassador's March 4 introductory call, Soltani was joined by chief of staff Nouredine Ait Messaoudene and Mohamed Tebbal, MSP's shadow minister for international relations. Soltani began the meeting by marking the October 5, 1988 riots as the birth of Algerian democracy, of the multi-party system in particular. However, he pointed out that Algeria had no prior experience with elections and was unprepared for the swift rise and electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the 1991 elections. In the civil unrest that followed, Soltani said that the political scene became "survival of the fittest," within a context of international isolation. "Nobody helped us in the 1990s," Soltani said, pointing out that the only international flight into Algeria for a number of years was an Alitalia flight to Italy. Soltani, a minister during the 1990s, said that during his international trips he and other ministers were received at "very low levels" and not by their ministerial counterparts. In Soltani's view, Algerian democracy was finally given the chance to develop in 1997-99, and was therefore roughly ten years old.

HOW TO JUDGE DEMOCRATIC GROWTH

¶3. (C) Because Algerian democracy was so young, Soltani told the Ambassador it was unfair for countries like France and the U.S. to judge it by their own criteria. He referred to the Department's annual Human Rights Report and did not say it was wrong, but said that Algeria should be measured by

standards relative to its own experience. He stated that Algeria was the "only country in the Arab world" without prisoners of conscience in its prisons, and stressed that freedom of expression was far more advanced relative to the rest of the region. As an example of the external variables he deemed unfair, Soltani referred to an international conference he attended in 2000 as Minister of Labor. According to Soltani, the conference featured the statistic that Algeria had 12 million poor people, measured by those earning less than one dollar per day. "So that makes us all poor?" Soltani asked, telling the Ambassador that the statistic ignored the fact that in 2000, one dollar bought a lot more in Algeria than it did in the U.S., and in Algerian culture, mutual dependence among family members was far stronger than in the West.

A VISION OF POLITICAL REFORM

14. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question regarding the challenge of integrating Algeria's massive youth demographic - 72 percent are under the age of 30 - into a political system they feel has left them behind, Soltani said the MSP was well-placed at the grass roots level to address this. Fourteen shadow ministers at the national level are also mirrored in MSP offices at each local baladiya (district), and the MSP also relies on NGOs to reach out to university students. Democracy, Soltani said, must grow like a tree. "You cannot expect the same results if you plant a concrete column and hope it will support democratic growth," he said, saying this sort of grass roots approach is what he used to

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tell university students when he was a university professor in the 1980s and early 1990s.

15. (C) Algerians do not participate in elections and the political system as a whole, Soltani said, because they believe in results more than in the system. Some of the responsibility for this, he said, lies with "our members" at the local level, who "do not deliver what is expected of them." The solution Soltani proposed was to clarify and increase the powers of local elected officials at the APC (local council) and APW (regional/state legislature) levels, so that the head of each APC and APW "would be like a president" to those people served by that elected body. This, he said, would create the accountability the political system so desperately needed.

16. (C) Soltani also said that the state of emergency, in effect since 1992, is blocking progress and democratic growth. He told the Ambassador that the MSP was working to get the government to lift it, which would dramatically ease restrictions on freedom of association and permit civil society to develop. With terrorism "finished" in his view and the country relatively stable, Soltani felt the residual strength of terrorists was "in their organization, otherwise they are just criminals." Shaking his head, he said a definition of terrorism was needed. "I have attended a lot of discussions on the topic over the years," Soltani said, "but I still have not heard a clear definition of this concept."

WHY WE ARE INSIDE THE TENT

17. (C) The MSP, and Soltani himself, are viewed by many of Algeria's more conservative Islamists as sell-outs for casting their lot with the regime and remaining in the ruling coalition. Soltani confronted the issue directly, telling the Ambassador that the MSP made a clear choice in the early 1990s not to go into "hard opposition" as the opposition in Algeria "merely watches" and is incapable of getting anything done. Within the system, he said the MSP could focus attention on issues of concern to party members, citing the renovation and construction of local hospitals as one

example.

18. (C) Soltani outlined the MSP's three core beliefs as 1) opposing violence, terror and the use of force, either to obtain power or to retain it; 2) universal human rights, without religious divisions; and 3) social justice and self determination. Soltani said he was pleased with Secretary Clinton and President Obama's attention to values thus far, saying "we followed Obama's story from the very beginning." He criticized former President Bush for "opening up too many fronts" against terror and not differentiating in the use of violence. "After using violence for 8 years," he asked, "did it solve anything in Palestine, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, or elsewhere?" Soltani said that he was particularly troubled by prospects for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, blaming the U.S. for "double standards" and saying that since 1948, the parties have been going from country to country, to each round of negotiations, yet there was still no result. He said the Arab plan for peace proposed by Saudi Arabia was a good plan, supporting a return to 1967 borders in exchange for full peace and recognition.

COMMENT

19. (C) Throughout its history, Soltani's MSP has sought to walk a fine line between a moderate Islam the regime finds palatable enough for inclusion in the political system and the demands of a frustrated Islamist base that does not believe the system has brought change to their daily lives. Along with its two ruling coalition partners, the FLN and RND, the MSP is organized in each of Algeria's 48 wilayas and 1451 local districts. However, the MSP's grass roots organization goes further, with ties to Islamic social service organizations, educational groups and more. It is thus not surprising to hear Soltani advocate the empowerment of local government in a vision that sounds a lot like federalism, but his view of decentralized political reform is at odds with the prevailing regime belief that decentralization is a recipe for instability. With its emphasis on social services at the local level, the MSP is arguably more in touch than the FLN and RND with a

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disgruntled and increasingly religious population. This makes Soltani's tightrope act a delicate feat indeed - how to avoid the ostracism and irrelevance that has befallen all other Islamic political parties who have been cast out of the tent since the FIS experience, while maintaining credibility with an Islamist base for whom the MSP represents the only real choice to participate in Algeria's political system.

PEARCE